Darth Vader vs. Superman: Aggression and Intimacy in Two Preadolescent Boys' Groups

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Group work reaches out to preadolescent boys with impulse and affect regulation problems by coinciding with their natural inclination toward peer relations and mastery. In group, boys recreate their peer culture and through the use of therapist interventions modify peer relationships into viable support networks. Collectively, they stimulate biological strivings for developmental maturity. The boys motivate each other to develop observing egos and alter problematic behavior. Boys growing up without fathers benefit from a safe environment where they can develop realistic masculine identities through their identification with group norms. Research shows that an identification with a benign masculine authority is the single most significant factor in a child developing affect regulation and socialization skills.

KEY WORDS: group; boys; preadolescence; intimacy; aggression.

INTRODUCTION

This paper chronicles my experience with two preadolescent boys' groups run over the course of one academic year. The average age of the boys was 11 years old. The groups were held at an out-patient mental health clinic of the Jewish Board of Family and Children Services in the Bronx, New York. The boys in my groups suffered a variety of traumas and displayed a range of acting-out behaviors. The purpose of the groups was to help the members develop better affect regulation and a tolerance for intimacy. Through their natural inclination toward peer relations, they would

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learn to modify their behavior and self-concept in order to satisfy frustrated dependency needs in an age appropriate manner.

During the year, both groups developed into viable therapeutic environments. The boys felt safe enough to observe their rigid maladaptive behaviors and experiment with new ways of relating. The Tuesday group members found safety in the commonality of their aggressive and tough demeanor. The Thursday group, on the other hand, developed a safe environment by disowning their aggression and assuming friendly and accommodating attitudes. Both groups found safety in shared behavior. The very behaviors that caused them to be rejected outside of the group were the basis for mutual acceptance within the group. This acceptance helped the members to develop "a more relaxed attitude towards the world" (Slavson, 1945).

In order to help explain the differences between the groups, I reviewed the available literature and then applied the relevant concepts to my experience of the two groups. I compared the two groups as they progressed through Garland's (1992) stages of group development. Although both were organized around maladaptive behavior, it was unclear why the group cultures were so different. The answer lay in the boys' constitutional and environmental differences and the impact of these on affect regulation. The members of the Tuesday group were better related and more secure in their primary attachments. However, they hardened themselves to their frustrating family environments, defending against a heightened sense of vulnerability by incorporating their aggression into their core identities. The Thursday group members had compromised egos and lacked secure attachments. In order to maintain a much needed although superficial sense of stability, they made themselves pliable. Their incapacity to tolerate their own aggression often led to explosive acting out and further instability. Both of the groups' attempts at adaptation denied members the experience of true intimacy, perpetuating frustration of their dependency needs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review summarizes the literature used to organize my experience of the groups' sessions. Garland describes five stages of group development—Preaffiliation, Power and Control, Intimacy, Differentiation-Cohesion and Separation-Termination (Garland, 1992). These stages provide a framework by defining peak moments in the evolution of my groups.

Preaffiliation Stage

Slavson (1945) explains that like families, groups form naturally. Further-more, in preadolescence, children have an age appropriate desire to connect with their peers (Pfeifer, 1993a). This drive to connect conflicts with a fear of intimacy (Garland, 1992). In groups, intimacy leads to vulnerability and re-gression. Dependency needs are awakened (Sugar, 1974), and weaknesses may be exposed (Soo, 1992). To protect themselves, members resist intimacy by en-gaging in approach avoidance behavior. Members avoid prolonged direct in-teractions, preferring the relative safety of parallel play (Garland, 1992; Soo, 1992).

Power-Struggle Stage

As the children begin to experience the group environment as safe and potentially helpful, issues of power and control emerge (Levine, 1979). In the power-struggle stage, the group's pecking order is established and the children negotiate with the therapist for power (Garland, 1992). The children begin to break through their isolation. They bump up against each other in a complex matrix of relationships and experience the boundaries of their egos (Slavson, 1945).

A pecking order is determined through the exhibition of verbal skills and physical strength (Soo, 1992). A social order begins to develop with its own rules and functions as the group's superego (Slavson, 1945). Chil-dren who choose not to follow or cannot follow the group's norms face scapegoating by the other members (Garland, 1992; Soo, 1992).

In developing their social order, children bring aspects of their peer culture into the group. The peer culture is a transitional phenomenon which helps the children cope with the strangeness of the therapeutic setting (Sakurai, 1992). It is also the precondition for the children's eventual in-vestment in a therapeutic culture (Spinner, 1992). The peer culture's be-havior provides the "syntax" of the therapeutic culture (Schamess, 1992; Spinner, 1992; Sakurai, 1992). This allows the members to embrace the therapeutic culture as their own creation.

With the peer culture in place, the children invest their attention in each other (Pfeifer, 1993a). They form a culture of resistance which con-centrates power in their hands, away from the therapist. From this position of relative control, they test out the permissiveness of the atmosphere (Schamess, 1977). They begin to express their doubts about the therapist's abilities and his benign interest (Garland, 1992). The members express dis-appointment as the group fails to realize their hopes that previously unmet needs will be fulfilled. Kahn (1993) elaborates on how members express

these feelings of emotional deprivation through demands for extra food at snack time.

At this stage, the children usually deal with painful feelings through the use of projective identification (Spinner, 1992). Poor ego and superego differentiation encourage splitting through idealization and devaluation (Schamess, 1990). Unable to tolerate a negative internalized object or self representation, the boys externalize the unwanted aspects of their self-image and project them onto the therapist and each other (Bernstein, 1995; Soo, 1992; Drisko, 1992). The therapist bears the pain of these projections and reflects on the feelings engendered. In time, the boys may begin to reintegrate these processed feelings.

Intimacy Stage

In the intimacy stage, the evolution from peer culture to therapeutic culture begins to take place (Garland, 1992). The therapeutic culture provides a structure in which members can rework maladaptive family relations (Pfeifer, 1993a). The children begin to use others as transference figures as they play out destructive object relations (Garland, 1992; Sugar, 1974; Spinner, 1992; Soo, 1992). Through multiple transferences, the children play out unacceptable impulses and conflictual feelings that have interfered with their development (Schamess, 1976).

The children exhibit maladaptive behavior patterns that originated as attempts to adapt to frustrating family environments (Slavson, 1945; Spinner, 1992) Their parents had compromised their natural push for autonomy either by inhibiting it or promoting it prematurely. The children express feeling rejected through negative attention-seeking behavior (Willock, 1990). Unable to engage their parents' loving concern, they choose hatred and abuse over being ignored. In this way, at the very least, they manage to discharge anxiety and aggression.

Initially, the children form a working relationship through their sustained commitment to the group despite individuals' acting out. The children themselves become the therapeutic medium (Slavson, 1945). At times, however, the therapist may be called on to model vulnerability (Pfeifer, 1993b). This vulnerability demonstrates the therapist's emotional commitment to the children and permits them to express their commitment to each other.

Differentiation-Cohesion Stage

In the differentiation-cohesion stage, the therapeutic culture is firmly established (Garland, 1992). The discharge of aggression helps neutralize

negative internal objects, encouraging self-other differentiation and object constancy (Soo, 1992). As introjects are modified, members develop self-acceptance (Slavson, 1943). They are liberated to enjoy each other as they really are.

The group is generally perceived as a good mother capable of meeting the children's needs (Soo, 1992). The therapist is perceived as a new object who with the nurturing "mother group" allows for the now conscious replay of personal issues in an array of new relationships known as the "family group" (Garland, 1992; Soo, 1992). The children teach each other alternative coping strategies (Trafimow, 1981; Garland, 1992). Trial action allows them to experiment with different ways of defining themselves. The children are more open to advice from each other and the therapist.

This new self-experience allows the children to negotiate dependency needs (Spinner, 1986). They are able to admit vulnerabilities and to reintegrate some of the painful aspects of the self previously projected onto others (Drisko, 1992). Acting out decreases as they become more verbal (Willock, 1990). The children avoid the threat and anxiety of aggression by expressing it representationally (Sakurai, 1992).

Separation-Termination Stage

In the separation-termination stage, children temporarily regress and play out previous behavioral and relationship patterns (Garland, 1992). Children who have experienced significant losses suffer a reawakening of the feelings associated with those losses. All reminisce about the group and about the changes they have made. Through the act of separation, each child integrates the group experience, which then becomes the frame of reference for approaching new social situations.

THE GROUPS

The groups were comprised of Latino and African-American males. The mean age for both groups was eleven. The average grade, completed by the end of the groups, was the fifth. Five out of eight boys in each group were in a special education setting for low academic or behavioral performance. A range of mood and behavior disorders were represented in both groups. The boys had similar presenting problems, including fighting, oppositionalism, and tantrums.

The boys lived in a variety of familial configurations and social networks. The extent of the social supports and the families' use of them was

comparable. The boys were physically healthy, with no major differences regarding hospital stays or chronic conditions. With the exception of one boy in the Tuesday group, the boys of both groups were supported by public assistance and received Medicaid benefits. All lived in the Northeast Bronx.

TUESDAY GROUP

The Tuesday boys tended to exhibit their behavior problems at home and at school. Five of eight had conflictual relationships with their primary caretakers. Three were in foster care, one with a non-relative. Two had consistent relationships with father figures. Two had been neglected or abandoned by both parents.

The Tuesday group developed a therapeutic culture out of a tough peer culture. They identified with a hyper-aggressive masculinity. They protected their fragile sense of autonomy by resisting intimacy in the group through aggressive and provocative behavior. In time, however, they unified around this common behavior pattern and created a safe environment. Paradoxically, they created intimacy out of their opposition to it and thereby laid the foundation for a therapeutic culture.

The Preaffiliation Stage

In the preaffiliation stage, the boys coped with their fear of intimacy and their desire to relate to each other by tentatively participating in group activities. They kept each other at a safe distance with their tough attitudes.

The boys tested limits to determine how safe it was to express feelings in the group. They baited me with derogatory comments about my family. They called me a "girl" and a "faggot." I realized they wanted to annoy me and asked what they thought I would do if I became angry. The boys burst forth with extremely graphic and increasingly sadistic fantasies about how I would physically and sexually abuse them. The anxiety in the room was intense. Defensively, Sam asserted that he could do what he wanted because I could not hurt him. He would sue. Mark argued back that I was larger and could control them if needed.

Sam and Mark expressed both sides of the group's concerns about the expression of sexual and aggressive impulses. Sam sought assurance that he could express his impulses without retaliation. Mark needed to feel that the boys' impulsivity would not become destructive. In a later session, Mark said "you are the only one who can control us."

The boys also made derogatory comments and physical threats to each other. They tentatively engaged in games but avoided earnest competition. Tom agreed to play George at chess but then used a four-move trick he learned at school. He won and left to play alone with Legos®. Mark played a quick game of basketball with Sam. When he lost, he came to talk to me. In later sessions, there would always be a rematch.

Power-Struggle Stage

During the power-struggle stage, the boys continued to act tough and mean. They engaged in competitions with each other for status, introducing aspects of their peer culture to establish their own power base. They then felt free to express their disappointments in me and in the group's failure to meet their needs and expectations.

The power struggle was most evident in the increase in earnest competition. The boys playing one-on-one basketball and developed tournaments in order to determine a pecking order. They made and revised lists of members' standings. Success on the court meant status in the group. As Mark and Sam switched off being the "champion," the other boys split their allegiance between the two. They would ally with one or the other during disputes.

At snack time anxiety over intimacy became palpable. Sitting around a table, they would fidget and engage in minor verbal skirmishes. At times they grouped together against me. In the "Telephone Game," one boy would make up a derogatory message about me and whisper it in his neighbor's ear. The message was then whispered from boy to boy, leaving me out of the loop. When it reached the last boy, he would then announce the message out loud.

The "Telephone Game" was a compromise formation that allowed the boys to express their fears of intimacy and isolation while also protecting themselves from those fears. They expressed the fears by disowning their vulnerable self and projecting it onto me. I was left out of the loop while hurtful things were being said about me. The game diminished the sense of isolation by including all the boys. It effectively limited the level of intimacy by prescribing what could be communicated.

Another compromise formation that mitigated the conflicting need for safety and relationship were the play fights that occurred during the last five minutes of each session. The boys thoroughly enjoyed playing and even hugging each other while pretending to fight. This behavior also addressed the conflict between their needs for autonomy and regressed dependency. They overpowered me by breaking the rules as a group.

Occasionally, in their quest for status, some boys would side with me. Once, during the "Telephone Game," Mark altered the message. When it was announced by the last boy, it was innocuous. Mark looked to me for approval. The members soon discovered who was responsible, and Mark was branded a "suck-up" and briefly scapegoated.

Some boys sought control in the group by developing negative attention-seeking behavior. They dealt with their conflicts over intimacy by becoming scapegoats. Tom would belch in others' faces. With this behavior, he would relate by engendering intense feelings in others, which ensured rejection by the whole group. As his behavior alienated him from the others, Tom began to complain about the group not meeting his needs. George characteristically sought nurturance through food. Both accused me of being cheap when I denied them extra cookies at the end of the session. In their eyes, I failed to satisfy the nurturance they needed and had hoped to get from the group. In time, Tom and George joined together by supporting each other in their frustration. George would go over to Tom at the end of the group, pull his sleeve and tell him to forget about it. They began to give each other the nurturance they craved. They stopped asking for extra snacks.

Intimacy Stage

In the intimacy stage, the boys developed their meanness into a collective identity. They talked about how they were in the group because they were "mean." They voted to remove a member they felt was "not mean enough." Family dynamics began to surface in the form of the maladaptive behavior patterns that had brought them into treatment.

The boys continued to disown their vulnerable parts through name calling. This led to physical threats and even fights. As I encouraged them to take time out and talk, they introduced the "Dissing Game" from their peer culture. This game consisted of making up clever insults about each other. I insisted on two rules: (1) the person "dissed" would immediately have a chance to "dis" back, and (2) whoever did not want to play could opt out of the game. In proposing the rules, I accepted their need to retaliate and to have their disowned vulnerable selves protected. In accepting the rules, the boys accepted me as a potentially helpful adjunct to their peer culture, thus transforming it into a burgeoning therapeutic culture.

The boys' behavior began to fit into three general categories—negative attention-seeking behavior, avoidant behavior, and intimidating behavior.

Brian, Tom and Gilbert were the least well related. They took turns acting silly and using bathroom humor. At other times they would beat on

a stuffed animal or call others' names. Brian was provocative. He disrupted activities and refused to take responsibility for his behavior. At school, he had fights with peers. At home, he was compliant with his infantilizing and dominating paternal grandmother. He clung to her out of fear of being separated from her in a custody battle with his biological mother. Tom bated members with obnoxious behavior in the waiting room until they hit him. He explained that this was a ploy to get them in trouble. In school, Tom engaged in similar acting out. He felt rejected by his peers; by his controlling mother who was over-identified with his younger sister; and by his abusive father who was preoccupied with his new family. He perpetuated this history of rejection. He provoked boys to hurt him so I would discipline them. He really wanted someone to discipline his hurtful parents. Gilbert provoked others with his excessive silliness. He often used baby talk and laughed loudly at his own jokes. Similarly at school, he had difficulty relating to peers and had tantrums when frustrated. At home, he had an intense negative attachment to his mother, who was often explosive and easily frustrated by her inability to understand him. She nurtured him primarily by feeding him. He interacted mainly with his immature younger sister.

George and Berry would often withdraw from the group. When provoked by a member or frustrated by me, George would become stormy, kick furniture and sit in a corner to brood. At home, he fought with his considerably smaller fraternal twin brother and was often accused of being brutal. He had witnessed many violent episodes between his alcohol and drug abusing parents and was often placed in the position of caring for himself and his twin. In the group, he replayed the explosive behaviors as well as the abandonment. Berry would participate competitively at games but remained uninvolved when the group was gathered together informally. Each week, he would ask to leave fifteen minutes early although this was against group rules and he was never permitted to leave. At school, he did not do his class work. At home, his parents were recently separated. Feeling his father's absence at home, the intimacy of the boys gathered together triggered his feelings of abandonment. He had to leave before he was left again; he had to be made to stay to feel as if he belonged.

Sam, John and Mark were hyper-competitive and intimidating. Sam was often nasty and provocative. At school, he was extremely disruptive and frightened his classmates with his disrespect toward his teachers. He lived with an adoptive mother who struggled to accept his limitations as a child with PDD and constantly berated him for not behaving like other children. John was hyperactive and impulsive. He used action to compensate for his lagging language skills. He tried to make contact with the other boys by playfully hitting them. On the school bus, he was disruptive and

fought. At home, his borderline mother was often hostile and sometimes paranoid. Mark was competitive and used physical threats to dominate others. At school he often had fights. At home he lived with a step-father who was passive. Mark's teen-age sister did most of the parenting and was often tyrannical.

The group became increasingly polarized as the boys expressed aggression in either regressive or dominating behavior. Their frustrating familial relations created a need to control their environment and diminished their capacity to tolerate ambiguity. The boys avoided the conflict between their dependency needs and their desire for autonomy by acting either like needy little children or dominating adults. Through projective identification they acted out the unwanted parts of each other.

As the split became more pronounced, the feeling of chaos in the room increased. George expressed it by crying out, "stop the madness." I asked the boys on each side to comment on the others' behavior. They blamed each other and suggested that various boys be removed. As the boys were acting out projected parts of each other, they were all integral parts of the group. I insisted that the group resolve this split. Initially, they struggled, but as necessity is the mother of invention, they reached a resolution. They made a pledge to confront each other and to accept the consequences of everyone's behavior. In using each other to check their behavior, they showed their growing tolerance for dependency. At the same time, their pledge indicated their striving for autonomy.

Differentiation-Coherence Stage

The resolution of the split between regressive or dominating behavior marked the beginning of the differentiation-coherence stage. The aggression of the peer culture "Dissing Game" gave way to constructive confrontation about behavior, and discussion about the relationship between behavior, trust and friendship. The aggression created a tough but safe environment in which they could defend against merger fantasies while tacitly accepting their dependency needs. They could trust each other to keep a distance and did their best work when physically dispersed throughout the therapy room. They felt safe enough to be more supportive. Most importantly, they were freed to accept what the group had to offer them. They began to use me as a new object, thus creating a family group in which they could practice new ways of relating.

The group struggled with incorporating vulnerability into their concept of masculinity. Mark expressed this one day by stating that I was not Su-

perman but Christopher Reeves. The aggressive idealized vision was giving way to a more humanistic perception of manhood.

The group's success in using discussion for problem solving led me to believe they were ready to discuss more personal issues. To facilitate this, I structured a half hour talk time. As auxiliary leader, Mark was the liaison between the group and myself. He used his power either to help organize discussions or to oppose me and lead the group in silly and regressed behavior. The subgrouping split resolved, the group worked together or regressed together. Mark sensed the importance of regression in service of the group ego.

The group discussed issues related to behavior, trust and friendship. They decided they did not completely trust each other because of how they behaved, and discussed the behaviors that they thought should change. Each vowed to work toward changing for the good of the group.

The increase in trust allowed them to talk about making friends. Tom explained that he tried to make friends by acting silly and getting them to laugh. John said that he "kick[s] them in the ass." Berry beamed in agreement and shared how he often became friends with guys right after he fought them. Through regressive or threatening behavior, they were maladaptively trying to make friends. The boys openly confronted each other, sometimes rather harshly, but generally for the benefit of the whole group. One day, John threatened Gilbert. Since Gilbert was no match, physically or verbally, for John, Mark intervened. He asked John, "does it make you feel like a man [to act that way]?" Mark interpreted their threatening behavior and the toughness as a means of feeling less vulnerable.

As this tough defense was needed less, the boys became more supportive. After weeks of George's complaining that he never got to give out snacks, Mark approached each member individually and persuaded them to let George have his turn. Another time, John used his growing observing ego to reach out and support Sam, who was having difficulty accepting time-out. John tried to convince him it would be okay. He said, "come on, you did it before and you can do it again. I had time-out twice. I did it."

With the support of their peers, the boys developed more socially adaptive behaviors. Gilbert had often burst into tears when he felt he was getting less than his share at snack. But on Tom's last day when the rest of the group decided to give Tom the extra slice of pizza, Gilbert, without a tantrum, gave up insisting that he should get a part of it. In acknowledgment of his choosing group acceptance over food, the group spontaneously broke-out into heartfelt applause. After the group confronted Berry on his asking to leave early each week, he grew closer to John, a more active participant. He compared their similar styles of dress and said that he felt John was like him. Similarly, Brian sought Mark as a mentor after

Mark confronted him on his infantile behavior. George tended to brood when annoyed. One day, after an incident with John, George sat stewing as he watched John happily play basketball. Eventually, he accepted a challenge from Mark to play chess, and by the end of the group, he was gleefully pelting other members with foam rubber balls. From watching John, he had learned a group-accepted way to discharge frustration. Sam proudly maintained that he did not care about the group. In fact, he left the group a month before it ended. After he discovered that Mark wanted him to return despite his having rejected them, Sam was able to admit to me that he missed the group. He talked about his need to make others fear him when he is afraid of them.

Separation-Termination Stage

As the group approached its scheduled ending date, hostility and aggression once again increased. The boys resisted discussing termination. The anger had to be expressed and processed before the rest of the business of termination could be approached. However, once the anger was addressed, the boys openly expressed intimacy; the inevitability of the end provided a safeguard.

In resisting me, the boys refused to sit together and talk. Some focused on games, others became provocative as they regressed to previous levels of functioning. Still others rejected the group entirely. Mark announced "I'm not coming back." John said "I shouldn't have come today." As I encouraged them to wonder what their anger was in response to, John exclaimed "well, we didn't decide that the group should end."

The boys united in their common feelings. Sadness encouraged reminiscing. They revisited past experiences. John remembered tricks the group played on me and suggested that I "better keep [my] eye on them this time," thus expressing the feeling that they still needed me. George reminisced about Tom who had left the group a month earlier when his family moved out-of-state. George began to belch and said that he was bringing Tom back; he missed him. Mark asked about Sam and regretted that he was not there for the last session.

In deciding who would get the extra slice of pizza at the termination party, the group asked that I give it to the boy who had improved the most. I suggested that they choose who was most improved. The boys then decided to take turns presenting how they each had changed. In their pitches, they demonstrated that they had learned to receive constructive criticism, observe their behavior and make changes. When it came time to vote, some voted for everybody. In the end, they gave the slice to George

who was the largest member of the group and apparently the most in need. The members' attitudes had shifted from an aggressive, competitive position to a more supportive and satisfying level of relating. The pizza was almost irrelevant as they sat back and noticed what they had accomplished. As they reminisced about their work together, they showed how they had internalized the therapeutic process.

The group asked me to take photographs on the last day so each boy would have a souvenir. As I took a group shot for each boy, the group altered their poses to express their particular feelings for that boy. This reflected their group culture, in which individuals striving for autonomy were supported and celebrated within the community of the group.

THURSDAY GROUP

The boys of the Thursday group had experienced severe environmental disruptions which compromised their object relations, ego and superego development. Seven out of the eight had been abandoned and/or neglected by both biological parents. Seven also had no contact with a father figure. Half lived in households headed by females over the age of sixty. Five of eight had been exposed to drugs in utero.

The boys in the Thursday group built a therapeutic culture to fit their particular needs. In order to cope with the threat of abandonment and neglect at home, they had developed a passive and complacent attitude. As a result their frustrations often built to the point of explosive behavior outside of the home, further undermining their already fragile positions. In the group, their need to avoid conflict helped create a safe environment in which they could experiment with the constructive use of aggression.

Preaffiliation Stage

During the first sessions, the room was filled with a latent sense of danger. The boys were caught between wanting to pursue new relationships and needing to protect themselves from the dangers of intimacy. They avoided their anxiety by denying some aspect of the group experience. Either they limited their engagement as players in a game or kept their distance from the others altogether. They would briefly play basketball or board games and then disperse to draw or play alone.

Paul would abandon a basketball game when the competition became too intense. Andy would leave a game when he was losing and accuse his opponent of cheating. They could not tolerate the overt aggression. At

times like these, the boys sought assurance from me. They would look back to see if I was watching them, or they would play near me. I was cast in the role of the rapprochement parent who allows the child to express his autonomy and investigate the world while remaining available at a distance.

At snack time, the boys sat together at a table. To cope with their proximity to one another, they developed a compromise formation. As some boys told bizarre fantasies and incredible stories, the others would explode into laughter and giggles. They were able to relate because the laughter helped discharge anxiety and conceal awareness of their closeness. Despite the obfuscation, the boys expressed their concerns about the group. Jeff exposed his fear of inadequacy and of physical injury by joking about his penis falling off. He defended against this fantasy with a counter fantasy which endowed him with three sets of genitalia.

The boys were also concerned about manifestations of aggression and sexual impulse in the group. Paul laughed uncomfortably as he fantasized about raping a woman. Juan asked if I was gay, expressing his doubt about my benign interest. Darren angrily interceded, saying "he's not"; he could not tolerate this threat.

Power and Control Stage

The boys established order with games from their peer culture. These games normalized the group experience by linking it to the schoolyard and allowed the boys to express collective feelings about the group within the context of that culture. "Suicide" was played by the group as a whole. This game directed their aggression away from the original target. It involved one boy throwing a ball against a wall while the others ran from it or tried to catch it. It was "suicidal" to try to catch it because getting hit by it too many times resulted in disqualification. The game was full of excitement and danger, like the group itself. The more the boys participated the more they put themselves in harm's way.

Some boys attempted to develop exclusive relationships. Darren and Andy would try to get my attention by acting clownish or leaning up against me. Others sought negative attention by purposefully breaking rules; they projected their anger onto me. When disciplined, they would threaten to leave.

More often the boys would bond together and exclude me. Jeff and Kaliyq monopolized the group's attention through silly antics and potty humor. My comments were rebuffed as I "wouldn't understand because [I was] not a kid." The boys enjoyed the intimacy as they projected their unwanted angry and anxious selves onto me.

Intimacy Stage

During this stage the boys increasingly transferred their feelings about their parental figures onto each other. As these attempts to relate failed, feelings of rejection and abandonment led to frustration. They projected their anger onto others. The amalgam of these behaviors provided the basis for a therapeutic culture in which relational patterns could be explored.

Paul often expressed the other members disowned anger. He would sit in the middle of the room and arbitrarily shout obscenities while the other boys ignored him. Alternatively, he begged me for special favors. He had been abandoned by both parents and was living with emotionally aloof grandparents.

Andy would tell on other boys or play the victim. By drawing me to his cause, he avoided expressing his anger. At home, he used his grandmother to intervene on his behalf after he provoked his twin brother into a fight. Abandoned and neglected by his alcohol and drug abusing parents, Andy had to manipulate adults to get nurturance.

Nelson and Martin also avoided expressing their anger directly in order to preserve the weak attachments they still had. Nelson repressed his feelings about his mother and father's unavailability. He felt a need to protect his depressed and fragile mother by denying his anger, as she denied hers. Consequently, his anger manifested in "accidental" hitting, leading to fights in group and at school. Martin expressed his anger by projection and oppositional behavior. He angered the other boys with his unavailability when they needed him for a unanimous decision. To top it off, he would laugh. He refused to acknowledge his inappropriate behavior. His mother was unavailable; she worked and went to school full-time. His father never acknowledged Martin as his son.

Darren and Juan both had caregivers in their 60's. These women could not tolerate the acting out that expressed the boys' indignation over being neglected and abused. The boys learned to be docile to protect their relationships and did not learn to modulate their aggression. They were underachievers at school and unable to protect themselves without uncontrolled violence. They would remove themselves from a group activity rather than confront another member on a perceived injury. Instead, Darren would sit beside me sucking his finger; Juan would beg me for a snack.

Kaliyq and Jeff were impulsive and domineering. In their daily lives, they tended to bully their peers to compensate for feeling powerless with strict non-biological parents and older siblings. As their respective out of family placements were further destabilized, the boys became unmanageable and had to be removed. They also had to leave the group. Their departures were terrifying to the others. Andy said that it felt like "they were

murdered" and that "everyday someone else is gone." It was "creepy." The boys never got a chance to say good-bye.

When the boys were anxious, they became highly reactive. At school one day, Darren had watched a student get badly hurt in a fight. In this sensitized state, he perceived Juan's playful hits in the waiting room as serious threats; they both overreacted and a fight ensued. Their inability to tolerate aggression and use it constructively left them unable to defend themselves realistically.

The following week, I informed the group of the incident and reminded them that the consequence for fighting outside of the group room was a one-week suspension. The boys felt anxious and regressed into fantasy play. Paul and Andy engaged in a mutual fantasy about a police car they constructed out of Legos®. They explained that they stole the car and were outfitting it with more cannons. In fantasy, they took control, feeling that I could not protect them from their aggression. Martin, and Nelson took turns brutalizing a stuffed animal and checking for my response. As none of the boys would "save" it, I decided to take it away before it ripped. I wanted to show that I could protect them—from destroying and being destroyed.

Despite these efforts, Paul could not control his anxiety. He tore around the room, breaking the rules and becoming angry with me as I set limits. He "accidentally" punched me in the groin. The other members stared in disbelief. I stood immobile, my face red. They wondered out loud if I would cry. I was angry but did not retaliate; instead I used the anger to set a limit and make the room safer. I placed Paul in time-out. This incident was a defining moment for the group and the boys often happily retold the story. They had always believed their aggression was the cause of whatever trauma they endured. Now they were learning that their aggression did not inevitably lead to abandonment or destruction, but could be contained and used constructively.

Differentiation-Coherence Stage

In the differentiation-coherence stage, the boys began to feel safe enough to discharge aggression, observe it and reintegrate it as part of a new self-concept. The increase in self-integration enhanced the boys' ability to observe their behavior and to differentiate from each other. All of this made it easier for them to use the group to develop intimacy. The group organized itself around non-competitive activities. The played out their destructive impulses symbolically, and their aggression in assertive and constructive gestures, for everyone's benefit. It was within the context of these

activities that the boys began to examine their maladaptive behavior in an accepting environment.

In the game "War," the boys separated into two teams and took turns throwing a soft ball at each other. The rules were fluid and often modified to meet the needs of the individual players. Being hit in the chest constituted a "death" and the player was required to sit out, though he was often given a reprieve if it was too frustrating. Boys who were not as coordinated were often given a handicap. When some became competitive, the group united to help them relax. Disputes were expediently settled with the boys encouraging each other to return to play. In this game about destruction the subtext was about creating and making use of a supportive structure.

In the movie "Star Wars," the boys found a depiction of their struggle to integrate their aggression. One snack time, the group laughed anxiously as they took turns repeating the words of the phantasmagorical Darth Vader when he reveals his true identity to the benign Luke Skywalker. "Luke, I am your father." The aggression that they disowned as dark and dangerous was part of them.

The boys collectively projected their father fantasies onto me. I was alternatively perceived as benign or coercive and withholding. They grew interested in my family life and wondered whether I had a wife and children. They also asked questions about sex. They had many misconceptions; they were surprised that sperm is needed for conception. This illustrated how absent men were in their lives; none lived with fathers.

The boys were distressed when other group members were absent. Martin and Nelson were shunned after missing several consecutive sessions, but the others denied their feelings of abandonment. However, they continued to give Martin and Nelson nasty looks and at snack refused to serve them. Confronted again, Andy said, "Well, they never come." Paul added that he would be friendly with them if they would come more regularly. When it was explained that Martin could not make it because his grandmother was in the hospital, Andy began to talk about his foster-parent being ill. Nelson talked about how his father had never lived with him and his mother. The rest of the group joined in sharing similar stories about their home life.

The boys made changes in their behavior. In organizing games, Paul was able to use his aggression to bring the group together. With increased self-esteem, Andy was able to enforce rules judiciously, on his own. Darren interacted more with the other members and no longer relied solely on our dyadic relationship. Martin was able to observe and admit to his oppositional behavior. Nelson learned to recognize his paranoid reactions more quickly and gained control of his aggressive retaliations.

Separation-Termination Stage

The aggression and anxiety around abandonment that was central to the work for these boys became overwhelming under the stress of termination. The boys temporarily regressed to their previous passive and explosive behaviors. In returning to the "Suicide" game, they chose to avoid facing each other while symbolically expressing the anger related to the loss inherent in termination. In the end, the boys joined together in expressing their anger towards me for not protecting them against the loss.

On the second to last week, during snack, Paul again asked me if I had a wife or children. The group became quiet and waited for an answer. Since the group had just talked about my family situation a few weeks earlier, I assumed this was not what he wanted to know. I asked the others if they remembered talking about my family. As the other boys recalled that I was single, they disputed whether I had children. Paul then said "He could adopt them!"

The boys' longing for a father coupled with the pending termination generated chaotic feelings. The group tried to gain control by using their rage in a shared fantasy in which they brutally dismembered me. As the fantasy progressed to its inevitable end, Paul stopped and said, "Then he would have no body." They would have destroyed what they feared losing. There was a brief reprieve; Darren then fantasized about how he would report me for sexually molesting him. Paul and Andy agreed to corroborate his story. I felt devalued, demoralized and discarded, so I asked them if they felt that I was trying to get rid of them. The answer was a resounding, "YES." Later Darren added, "I don't care. I don't need you."

In follow-up individual interviews, it was clear that the group continued for them in their memories. What they created could not be destroyed. Andy put it simply: "I want my group back."

CONCLUSION

Both the groups developed therapeutic cultures that evolved from the boys' common behavior problems. As the boys felt accepted by their group, they learned self-acceptance and integrated previously disowned parts of themselves. Their ability for self-observation increased, and they practiced a variety of coping behaviors. Their relationships inside and outside of the group became more satisfying, decreasing the amount of their frustration and hostility.

The boys coped with their aggression differently due to their particular environments and innate constitutions. The Tuesday group strongly identified with their own aggression; the Thursday group typically disowned theirs. The Tuesday group members were hardened by trauma and frustration. They equated aggression with being manly and used it to protect a fragile sense of autonomy. The Thursday group members had experienced severe trauma at an early age which compromised their primary attachments. They experienced their aggression as threatening fragile familial bonds, and ultimately, their survival. Paranoid, they experienced their anger as a danger coming from outside themselves.

As the boys' behaviors coalesced into a group culture, a crisis occurred in each group. The boys' disowned selves threatened the groups' cohesion. With interventions that reconfirmed my commitment to each member, I demonstrated an acceptance for their split-off parts. This helped the boys to begin to experience these unwanted feelings and reintegrate them into a new self-concept.

Changes in self-concept coincided with modifications in perceptions of masculinity. Research shows that a relationship with a benign masculine authority is the single most significant environmental factor in the promotion of affect regulation and socialization in all children (Cath, 1982). As group norms changed, the boys reexamined their individual attitudes toward masculinity and aggression. The Tuesday group integrated the vulnerability of Christopher Reeves into their concept of Superman. The Thursday group considered the moment in Star Wars when Luke Skywalker finds out that his nemesis, Darth Vader, is his father. Consequently, both groups experienced greater affect control and more satisfying relationships.

With better ego-integration and more realistic masculine identities, the boys worked together to develop alternative coping strategies and improve their behavior. The Tuesday group members' vulnerability allowed them to become more supportive. The Thursday group members used their aggression to be more assertive and verbally expressive. The capacity to be vulnerable and assertive allowed the boys in both groups to experience intimacy without sacrificing their integrity.

Further study of the curative aspects of boys' groups that enhance a strong sense of self and healthy affect regulation would help us to build more precise interventions and treatment models. With the increase in youth violence, it is imperative that we develop new ways of reaching preadolescent boys and of providing external and internal structures that will help guide them through adolescence.

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